Pope Gelasius I

(1 March 492 – 19 November 496)

BRIEFING

Pope Gelasius I was the bishop of Rome from 1 March 492 to his death on 21 November 496. Gelasius was a prolific author whose style placed him on the cusp between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Some scholars have argued that his predecessor Felix III may have employed him to draft papal documents, although this is not certain.

During his pontificate he called for strict Catholic orthodoxy, more assertively demanded obedience to papal authority, and, consequently, increased the tension between the Western and Eastern Churches. Surprisingly, he also had cordial relations with the Ostrogoths, who were Arians (i.e. Non-trinitarian Christians), and therefore perceived as heretics from the perspective of Nicene Christians.

PLACE OF BIRTH

There is some confusion regarding where Gelasius was born: according to the Liber Pontificalis he was born in the Roman province of Africa (present-day Tunisia), referred to as "natione Afer", while in a letter addressed to the Roman Emperor Anastasius he stated that he was "born a Roman" ("Romanus natus"). J. Conant opined that the latter assertion probably merely denotes that he was born in Roman Africa before the Vandals invaded it.

ACACIAN SCHISM

The papal election of Gelasius on 1 March 492 was a gesture of continuity: Gelasius inherited the conflicts of Pope Felix III with Eastern Roman Emperor Anastasius and the patriarch of Constantinople and exacerbated them by insisting on the obliteration of the name of the deceased Patriarch Acacius of Constantinople from the diptychs, in spite of every ecumenical gesture offered by the contemporaneous Patriarch Euphemius.

The split with the Emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople was inevitable, from the Western view, because they considered the Monophysite view of Jesus Christ having only a Divine nature a heresy. Gelasius authored the book De duabus in Christo naturis (On the dual nature of Christ), which described Catholic doctrine in the matter. Thus Gelasius, for all the conservative Latinity of his style of writing, was on the cusp of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

During the Acacian schism, Gelasius advocated the primacy of the See of Rome over the universal Church, both East and West, and he presented this doctrine in terms that became the model for successive popes, who also claimed papal supremacy because of their succession to the papacy from the first supreme pontiff, Peter the Apostle.

In 494, Gelasius authored the very influential letter Duo sunt to Anastasius on the subject of the relation of Church and state, which letter had political impact for more than a millennium: Pope Gregory XVI quoted from it in his letter to the Swiss clergy, Commissum divinitus (17 May 1835), responding to the Baden articles, which gave some of the Swiss cantons authority over church matters including the sacraments.

SUPPRESSION OF THE LUPERCALIA

Closer to home, after a long contest Gelasius finally suppressed the ancient Roman festival of the Lupercalia, which had persisted for several generations among a nominally Christian population. Gelasius' letter to the Senator Andromachus treated the primary contentions of the controversy and incidentally provided some details of the festival, which combined fertility and purification, that might have been lost otherwise.

Although the Lupercalia was a festival of purification, which had given its name "dies februatus", from "februare" ("to purify"), to the month of February, it was unrelated to the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, also commonly denominated "Candlemas", which latter feast commemorates the fulfillment of the Holy Family's ceremonial obligations pursuant to Mosaic law 40 days after the birth of the first son. In the instance of the Holy Family, that occurred 40 days after Christmas, on 2 February.

DEATH

After a brief yet dynamic ministry, Gelasius died on 21 November 496. His feast day is 21 November.

WORKS

Gelasius was one of the most prolific authors of the early bishops of Rome. Over 100 Gelasian letters survive, although 49 of these are fragmentary, some as short as several lines. 6 treatises are extant that bear the name of Gelasius. According to Cassiodorus, the reputation of Gelasius attracted to his name other works not by him. Although his dogmatic letters connected to the Acacian Schism were widely circulated in late antiquity, and have been the focus of much scholarly interest, the majority of Gelasius' letters were in fact concerned with the administration of the church of suburbicarian Italy.

Decretum Gelesianum

The most famous of pseudo-Gelasian works is the list De libris recipiendis et non recipiendis ("On books to be received and not to be received"), also denominated the Decretum Gelasianum, which is believed to be connected to the pressure for orthodoxy during his pontificate and intended to be read as a decretal by Gelasius on the canonical and apocryphal books, which internal evidence reveals to be of later date. Thus the determination of the canon of Sacred Scripture has traditionally been attributed to Gelasius.

Gelasian Sacramentary

In the Latin Catholic tradition, the pseudo Gelasian Sacramentary is in fact a liturgical book that was derived from Roman sources and transcribed, with inclusion of native Gallican liturgical elements, near Paris in the middle of the 8th century. While including the texts of some prayers that Gelasius composed, he was not a principal author or compiler of the book. The manuscript (Vatican, Vatican Library, Reg. lat. 316 + Paris, National Library, ms. lat. 7193, fol. 41–56) is actually titled the Liber sacramentorum Romanae ecclesiae (Book of Sacraments of the Roman Church).

The attribution to Gelasius is premised in part at least on the chronicle of the Supreme Pontiffs that is denominated the Liber Pontificalis, which states of Gelasius that he "fecit etiam et sacramentorum praefationes et orationes cauto sermone et epistulas fidei delimato sermone multas" ("he also made prefaces to the sacraments and prayers in careful language and many epistles in polished language regarding the faith"). An old tradition linked the book to Gelasius, apparently based on the ascription of Walafrid Strabo to him of what evidently is this book.

DECRETUM GELASIANUM

The Gelasian Decree (Latin: Decretum Gelasianum) is a Latin text traditionally thought to be a decretal of the prolific Pope Gelasius I (492–496). The work reached its final form in a five-chapter text written by an anonymous scholar between 519 and 553. The second chapter is a list of books of Scripture defined as part of the biblical canon by a Council of Rome, traditionally dated to Pope Damasus I (366–383) and thus known as the Damasine List. The fifth chapter of the work includes a list of rejected works not encouraged for church use.

Content

The Decretum exists in a number of recensions of varying lengths. The longest has five chapters, another recension has the last four of these chapters, another the last three, and another the first three.

1. A list of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as attributes of Christ, and of the titles that are applied to Christ

2. A list of the books that make up the Old and New Testament. The Old Testament list contains, in addition to the books of the Hebrew Bible, all of the deuterocanonical books other than Baruch with the Letter of Jeremiah (which however might be subsumed under the Book of Jeremiah). The New Testament list contains the 27 standard books: 4 Gospels, Acts, 14 letters of Paul (including Hebrews), Apocalypse of John, and 7 General Letters (of which 2 and 3 John are attributed to "the other John the elder", and Jude to "Judas the Zealot"). The Decretum's canon of Scripture is thus identical with the Catholic canon issued by the Council of Trent.

3. A short endorsement of the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome over the other bishops, citing the authority of Peter, and a statement of the order of precedence of the three principal episcopal sees: Rome, then Alexandria, then Antioch.

4. A list of writings that are "to be received": the decrees of the first four ecumenical councils, and the writings of the Church Fathers and ecclesiastical writers mentioned in the chapter, varying from famous to obscure (for example Sedulius and Juvencus). Notably, it suggests that while Origen of Alexandria's work can be read, he personally should be rejected as a "schismatic".

5. A list of writings that are "not to be received": many early Christian gospels, acts, apocalypses and similar works that are part of what we know as the New Testament Apocrypha. Mentioned are:

> *- The Acts of Andrew, of Thomas, of Peter, of Philip, and of Paul and Thecla.*
> *- The Gospels of Matthias, of James, of Peter, of Thomas, of Bartholomew, of Andrew, the Syriac Infancy Gospel and the Gospel of Barnabas (not the 16th century Gospel of Barnabas).*
> *- The Apocalypses of Paul, Thomas, and of Stephen.*
> *- The Testament of Job, the Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres, the Lots of the Apostles and the Letters from Jesus to Abgar and from Abgar to Jesus.*

The various recensions of the Decretum appear in multiple surviving manuscripts. It is "attributed in many manuscripts to Pope Damasus (366–384). In other and more numerous manuscripts the same decree occurs in an enlarged form assigned within the documents in some cases to Pope Gelasius (492–496), in others to Pope Hormisdas (514-23), and in a few cases the documents are simply anonymous."

> *The copies of the decree attributed to Damasus are contained in four manuscripts, two dated in the eighth century and two in the ninth. Each decree is headed 'Incipit concilium urbis Romae sub Damaso Papa de explanatione fidei' ["Here begins the Council of Rome under pope Damasus 'On Explaining the Faith'"]. Each consists of three short chapters, the second of which treated 'de scripturis divinis agendis est quid universalis catholica recipiat ecclesia et quid vitare debeat' ["Now indeed the Divine Scriptures must be discussed: what the universal Catholic Church receives and what it should avoid"]. There follows a catalogue of the Old and New Testament books.*

In the Damasine recension, there is no mention of pope Gelasius. Though the date of the Roman Council is not mentioned in the Decretum, the view that came to prevail was that it was the council held in 382: "In 1794 F. Arevalo, the editor of Sedulius, started the theory that the first three of these five chapters were really the decrees of a Roman Council held a century earlier than Gelasius, under Damasus, in 382 A.D.".

Another recension contains only the last three chapters and is prefaced by the sentence: "Here begins the decretal 'On books to be received and not to be received' which was written by Pope Gelasius and seventy most erudite bishops at the apostolic seat in the city of Rome". Here the focus is on the books and the Decretum is considered to be a decretal of Pope Gelasius. In the Gelasian recension there is no mention of Pope Damasus and the Council of Rome.

Traditional view

For years, the commonly accepted view was that the Decretum Gelasianum was a decretal of pope Gelasius, containing the text of a canon of Scripture originally produced by the Council of Rome under Damasus a century earlier, and that this canon was identical with the Catholic canon issued by the Council of Trent.

For instance, the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, states:

> *A council probably held at Rome in 382 under St. Damasus gave a complete list of the canonical books of both the Old Testament and the New Testament (also known as the 'Gelasian Decree' because it was reproduced by Gelasius in 495), which is identical with the list given at Trent.*

Likewise, Catholic historian William Jurgens writes:

> *The first part of this decree has long been known as the Decree of Damasus, and concerns the Holy Spirit and the seven-fold gifts. The second part of the decree is more familiarly known as the opening part of the Gelasian Decree, in regard to the canon of Scripture: De libris recipiendis vel non recipiendis. It is now commonly held that the part of the Gelasian Decree dealing with the accepted canon of Scripture is an authentic work of the Council of Rome of 382 A.D. and that Gelasius edited it again at the end of the fifth century, adding to it the catalog of the rejected books, the apocrypha. It is now almost universally accepted that these parts one and two of the Decree of Damasus are authentic parts of the Acts of the Council of Rome of 382 A.D.*

Similarly, the Catholic Encyclopedia links the Decree to the Council of Rome of 382 and its definition of the canon:

> *St. Jerome, a rising light in the Church, though but a simple priest, was summoned by Pope Damasus from the East, where he was pursuing sacred lore, to assist at an eclectic, but not ecumenical, synod at Rome in the year 382. Neither the general council at Constantinople of the preceding year nor that of Nice (365) had considered the question of the Canon. This Roman synod must have devoted itself specially to the matter. The result of its deliberations, presided over, no doubt, by the energetic Damasus himself, has been preserved in the document called "Decretum Gelasii de recipiendis et non recipiendis libris", a compilation partly of the sixth century, but containing much material dating from the two preceding ones. The Damasan catalogue presents the complete and perfect Canon which has been that of the Church Universal ever since.*

Critical view

In 1912, Ernst von Dobschütz examined all the manuscripts of the Decretum. Dobschütz showed that the first chapter of the five-chapter recension contains a quotation from a work of Augustine (in Joh. ix 7, Migne, xxxv 1461) written in 416 and therefore the Damasine recension of the Decretum could not be a decree of the Council of Rome held in 382. He also argued that all of the shorter versions are derived from the five-chapter recension and concluded that the Decretum was "no genuine decree or letter either of Damasus or Gelasius, but a pseudonymous literary production of the first half of the sixth century (between 519 and 553)".

In the course of examining the place of the Muratorian fragment in the development of the canon, Geoffrey Mark Hahnemann examined the Decretum Gelasianum and came to similar conclusions. Hahnemann argues against the Decretum originating in Pope Damasus's time based on two arguments:

- Jerome's silence about a canonical list issued by the council of Rome in 382: "It seems highly improbable that, if Jerome, who was probably present at the council and was certainly at Rome, had ever heard of such a pronouncement about canonical books, he should nowhere have mentioned it, or that it should not have qualified his own statements on the Canon. [...] Yet there is no mention or evidence of a change of position in the works of Jerome. The authenticity of at least the catalogue in the Damasine Decree is thus called into question."

- The Damasine Decree not being mentioned as such by any independent[clarification needed] document until 840. Most notably, Pope Nicholas I, when discussing the canon in the 9th century, mentions the letter of Innocent I (401-417) but not any decrees by Damasus, which, being earlier, would be more important.

Hahnemann also points out that the later writers of the 9th century who refer to the document under the name of Gelasius or Hormisdas never credit it to Damasus. He also argues that Dionysius Exiguus beginning his collection of Latin canons and decretals with Damasus's successor, Siricius, implies that no pope before Siricius issued decretals.

Textual history

The complete text is preserved in the mid-eighth-century Ragyndrudis Codex, fols. 57r-61v, which is the earliest manuscript copy containing the complete text. The earliest manuscript copy was produced c. 700, Brussels 9850-2.

Versions of the work appear in multiple surviving manuscripts, some of which are titled as a Decretal of Pope Gelasius, others as a work of a Roman Council under the earlier Pope Damasus. However, all versions show signs of being derived from the full five-part text, which contains a quotation from Augustine, writing about 416 after Damasus, which is evidence for the document being later than that.

Little is known of the compiler of the decree, other than perhaps he was of Southern Gallic (modern Southern France) origin.

GELASIAN SACRAMENTARY

The so-called Gelasian Sacramentary (Latin: Sacramentarium Gelasianum) is a book of Christian liturgy, containing the priest's part in celebrating the Eucharist. It is the second oldest western liturgical book that has survived: only the Verona Sacramentary is older.

The book exists in several manuscripts, the oldest of which is an 8th-century manuscript in the Vatican Library, acquired from the library of Queen Christina of Sweden (thus MS Reginensis 316); in German scholarship this is referred to as the Altgelasianum, and is considered the sacramentary used by Saint Boniface in his mid-8th century mission on the European continent. This is the most important surviving Merovingian illuminated manuscript, and shows a synthesis of Late Antique conventions with "barbarian" migration period art motifs comparable to the better known insular art of Britain and Ireland.

In none of its old manuscripts does the book bear the name of Gelasius but is simply called Liber sacramentorum Romanae ecclesiae ("Book of Sacraments of the Church of Rome"). However, an old tradition linked the book to Pope Gelasius I, apparently based on Walafrid Strabo's ascription of what is evidently this book to the 5th-century pope. The sacramentary was compiled near Paris around 750, and it contains a mixture of Gallican and Roman elements. The dating of the liturgical contents are not based on characteristics of the surviving manuscript itself (ca 750): most of its liturgy reflects the mix of Roman and Gallican practice inherited from the Merovingian church. In 785-6 the reforms of Pope Gregory I, Gregory the Great, were supplied to Charlemagne by Pope Hadrian I. The spurious ascription to Gelasius gave an added authority to the contents, which are an important document of pre-Gregorian liturgy.

Among several distinct rites current in the West before the 8th century, the two most influential were the Roman rite used in Italy south of Lombardy and the Gallican in use in most of the rest of Western Europe, save Iberia and the British Isles. By 700 the influence of the Roman sacramentary had modified Gallican usage. This mixture of rites represented in the Gelasian Sacramentary was superseded when Charlemagne asked Pope Hadrian to provide an authentic Roman sacramentary for use throughout the empire. In 785-86, the pope sent the emperor the Sacramentarium Hadrianum, a version of the Gregorian Sacramentary for papal use, which was adapted for the Carolingian empire.

The "Gelasian Sacramentary" comprises the pre-Gregorian three parts, corresponding to the liturgical year, made up of masses for Sundays and feasts, prayers, rites and blessings of the Easter font and of the oil, prayers at dedication of churches, and for the reception of nuns.

LEGACY

Cardinal Giuseppe Maria Tomasi quoted a portion of a missal that was attributed to Gelasius in the Mass that was entitled 'Contra obloquentes' and published it. The section read:

> *Grant, We beseech Thee, O Lord, that we do not trouble ourselves about the contradiction of spurious minds, but once that very wickedness has been spurned let us pray that you suffer us neither to be frightened by the unjust criticisms, nor to be attracted to the insidious flatteries, but rather to love that which Thou dost command. . .*

In 1751, Pope Benedict XIV published this quotation within his Apostolic Constitution Providas that attacked freemasonry.